

# Green Metaphysics: a sustainable and renewable liberal arts education

Nigel Tubbs  
University of Winchester, UK  
E mail: [nigel.tubbs@winchester.ac.uk](mailto:nigel.tubbs@winchester.ac.uk)

# Green Metaphysics: a sustainable and renewable liberal arts education

## Abstract

*Liberal Arts education has carried with it the tradition of a virtuous elite. The metaphysics that accompanies this elitism has its own ground in the master and slave relation of Antiquity. But a different metaphysics offers itself now for liberal arts, one which can be argued to be ‘green’, by being sustainable and renewable without the exploitation of the resources and labours of others. It might seem strange to argue that liberal arts should be the natural home of such a green metaphysics, but I will argue that liberal arts has two clear advantages: one is that part of its history has been to champion the comprehensive view of the world, as opposed to one that is fragmented within the professionally demarcated borders of single academic subject disciplines. The other is that it has held close to itself the Delphic maxim ‘know thyself’, and that this remains a crucial ingredient for any green education.*

Keywords: green metaphysics, liberal arts, sustainable, renewable, education.

Thank you for inviting me to speak at this first European Liberal Education Student Conference.<sup>1</sup> It is an honour to be involved in the beginning of something that has such intense educational potential, not just for you, the participants, but also for the shape in which Liberal Education in Europe might develop in the coming years.

In my talk I want to do two main things: to question a fundamental tenet of liberal arts—the conception of the liberal master—and to suggest how in doing so liberal arts might reconceptualise the metaphysics of mastery. From these considerations I want to suggest for liberal education a notion of ‘green metaphysics,’ and how the notions of ‘sustainable’ and ‘renewable’ might be redefined within it. In turn this might help us to rethink a green metaphysical education to which liberal arts education could contribute.<sup>2</sup>

First, then, I will explore the metaphysics of mastery that still prevails in liberal arts education, looking especially at the vulnerability that is unavoidable in the logic that defines this mastery. Then I shall extend this to the question of the sustainability and renewability of the current Western lifestyle. I will ask if we can find a green *educational* metaphysics, one within which liberal arts education can be sustainable and renewable.

To begin with, let us make the assumption that the notion of freedom carried in liberal arts education has its roots in *paideia* and *enkuklios paideia* of Greek antiquity, and in the *artes liberales* of Roman Antiquity. Let us also presume that its educative *telos* originated in the experience of awe and wonder at the order and harmony of the universe which quickly evolved into questions about the order of nature (*physis*/physics), questions about the order of the city (politics), and questions about the order and harmony of truth (metaphysics). Let us also call the love of such questions *philosophy*.

Now, on a different note, let us consider for a moment this comment from the *Manifesto* of the Green Party in the 2015 UK General Election.

For 40 years the rich and powerful have forced us to live in their fantasy world – a world that suits the minority not the majority. This is a world imagined from the point of view of the healthy, the wealthy and the privileged. Where there is a satisfying job just round the corner if only we could be bothered to look for it, where resources are limitless, and where the only obstacle to total fulfilment is the psychology of individual failure. (Green Party, 2015, p. 9)

What, if anything at all, have the tradition of Liberal Arts education and the Green movement in common, and how might they speak to each other, and more importantly, how might they speak of each other?

Immediately, however, we should consider if liberal artists are in some way complicit in this fantasy of the rich and powerful. Liberal arts has been a champion of freedom for over two and a half thousand years. It grounded itself in the search for the first principles of all things, and attached great significance to the logic of Aristotle's (and Plato's) case for a prime mover. Now, suspending disbelief for a moment in an obvious anachronism, we might observe that the prime mover has its own ecological or green credentials. As self-moving and self-thinking, and being wholly independent and unchanging, it is sustainable because self-renewable in-and-of-itself. Sharing the ecology of the prime mover were the soul or intellect, the planets (and later their angels), and on earth the free man or the master who is free in-himself. In contrast, the sub-lunar world, the body, material existence, and the barbarian existence of the slave were neither sustainable nor renewable according to this ancient logic of freedom and truth.

Each of these distinctions between the sustainable and renewable 'in-itself' and the unsustainable and non-self-renewable 'for-another', are grounded in what we might call a metaphysical *ecology*. The concept of truth was defined as in-itself because truth and independence were seen as one and the same thing, that is, the harmony of a first principle having its own necessity within itself, being self-caused and self-causing, and being self-

sufficient, non-composite and non-contingent.<sup>3</sup> As such, truth is defined here as sustainable and renewable, exploiting no resources but its own and having infinite resources to draw upon. Within this same metaphysical ecology untruth belonged to the kind of being that could not sustain itself, to that which was composite, changeable, and contingent, unable to find within itself the resources required to sustain and renew itself. The metaphysics of untruth here, then, is rather less green than the assumptions underpinning the metaphysics of truth in itself.

But I have taken time to paint this picture of ancient metaphysics only in order to turn this ecological order on its head. Ancient truth in-itself was in fact only sustained by exploiting the thinking of the finite world, an exploitation which it consistently denied in its claim to be ineffable. Similarly, the ancient master, being dependent upon the slave and exploiting his resources, was never independent or sustainable. Masters exported their contingency, their work, to their slaves, but in doing so demonstrated that mastery in-itself is not sustainable or renewable without the exploitation of the resources of others. We might tentatively suggest here that nothing can be said to be green which survives only by the exploitation of the resources of others.

This all came crashing down in the movement of European enlightenment. The ambivalence of the prime mover did not survive the universality and the sovereignty of enlightenment reason, and in the end the sustainable and renewable god proved neither sustainable nor renewable against the power of rational thinking. God died because reason discovered that it

was reason's own work, or was the power of thinking, that had all along sustained and renewed the idea of truth.

Equally dramatically, the free master did not survive this same rational revolution. The logical inconsistency of the independent master having his freedom based in his dependence upon slaves, expressed now against the equality of all rational human beings, overthrew slavery and created the modern notions of equality and freedom. Many have demonstrated how Western freedom was always compromised by its attachment to slavery, but many also continue to demonstrate how even this Western notion of equality and freedom still harbours within it prejudices against others, expressed in cultures of racism, sexism, anti-semitism, islamophobia, etc.

What then of the ecology of modern reason and modern freedom? The ancient versions of metaphysical truths and political freedoms collapsed because their claims to be self-sustainable and self-renewing were always vulnerable. But what of contemporary Western truth and freedom? Are they also vulnerable? They are. Neither can claim the green credentials of sustainability or renewability. Enlightenment truth, like ancient truth, is also abstracted or removed from its contingency upon the work, the *thinking*, in which it is determined. We know this abstraction in various rational shapes or cultures: instrumental rationality, neoliberal rationality, and populist rationality. Similarly enlightenment freedom, like ancient freedom, is also abstracted or removed from the work, the labour, upon which it

depends. We know this abstraction in the main as the culture of globalized markets and outsourcing. I will return to these ideas again in a moment.

The one characteristic above others that defines the ecology of such rational metaphysics and politics is that their truths are just as dependent upon exploiting the resources of others as were their ancient counterparts. Thus they share the same logical and political vulnerability that undermined ancient philosophy and its slave-owning masters.

But modern Western culture(s) has powerful safeguards against such vulnerability. We know, in general, that Western lifestyles are neither sustainable nor renewable. But we are protected from having to face up to this; not by admitting the vulnerability of our mastery but instead by abandoning metaphysics or truth altogether. In the death of metaphysics is the death also of a universal or comprehensive view that could not only place such lifestyles in the universal conditions of their possibility, but also demonstrate their complicity within the inequalities and injustices of such conditions. Remember how Marx explained that when one encounters a commodity one sees exchange value and not the socially necessary labour that is objectified in it. The same can be said now of our own fossil fuel culture.<sup>4</sup> When I make a cup of tea, I do not see the socially necessary unsustainable exploitation of non-renewable resources that are objectified in my actions. I am, more accurately, making a *fossil fuel cup of tea*. But just as in Antiquity the prime mover was protected from the contingency of being known finitely, and just as the free master was protected from his mediation in and by the work of his slaves,

and just as the commodity is protected from displaying the processes of its production, so my cup of tea is kept entirely separate from the fossil fuel conditions of its possibility.

Not only this. If I do for a moment admit to understanding the fossil fuel culture of my cup of tea, the death of metaphysics kicks in to ensure that I only ever have a local, and not a universal relation to that culture. One might conclude here that my making a cup of tea is insignificant in contributing to climate change, and that by the same token my not making a cup of tea would be merely a futile gesture. With no ability to conceptualise the universal I am left in what Adorno would call the totality that is false. Green politics itself is unsustainable within this totality, and risks resigning itself to only ever being a self-contradiction. In the totality that is false even protests against fossil fuels are fossil-fuel-dependent protests. No doubt we could imagine for a moment an attempt to make visible this fossil fuel culture by adding the label 'fossil fuel' to everything. As enlightening as it might be to know the cup of tea, the conference, and the mobile device, as the *fossil fuel cup of tea*, the *fossil fuel conference* and the *fossil fuel mobile device*, perhaps all this would do in the end is to reinforce the resignation that accompanies the idea that, even in understanding how the totality really is false, there is still nothing we can do about it.

Faced with this, where might we look for a green concept of truth and freedom, or a modern metaphysical ecology of the sustainable and the renewable? Let us start with an observation. As history shows, that which sustains and renews itself through the exploitation of the resources of others is not sustainable or renewable in-and-of-itself. This is the instability, the



self-contradiction, and the illusion of control that haunts the metaphysics of all such mastery. This illusion currently enjoys its status as *entitlement*. The modern master deems itself entitled to its fossil fuel freedoms, and without having to learn how vulnerable this entitlement is to the instability of the definition of the in-itself that grounds it.

Now, it may be easy enough to see the vulnerability of ancient mastery. After all, it occurred in a society grounded in slavery. But is it so easy to identify the vulnerabilities of mastery in modern societies? I do not think we have to look too far to find them. Is it not the case that we reveal the vulnerabilities of our mastery whenever we try to overcome something that threatens it? More generally, do we not seek to master nature with science and technology; or to master the effects of chance and fate by means of insurance; or to master brute force and its threat to property by means of the rule of property law?

But perhaps of even greater significance, the means of defending our mastery has its own forms of culture, reproducing itself as nationalism, protectionism, globalization, racism, and sexism (to name the most well known). The greater the vulnerability of our mastery, the harder and more brutal these cultures become.

In each of these cultures there is a common strategy. Mastery defends itself by ensuring its control over and subsequent exploitation of the resources of others. This can be in the home,

at work, in places of leisure, or internationally in outsourcing jobs and in exploiting the resources of poorer parts of the world. But look, if this mastery depends upon the exploitation of the resources of others, then it is not sustainable or renewable in and of itself. The whole of the metaphysics of such mastery is exposed as illusory, and self-defeating; or as Marx might have said, the harder this kind of mastery defends itself, the more it exposes its inherent contradictions.

Where then is green metaphysics within these cultures of non-sustainable and non-renewable exploitative mastery? I want to suggest that green metaphysics arises from within the

vulnerabilities of the metaphysics of mastery. It does so by offering us ~~Where is green metaphysics within this continuing picture of the exploitation of resources? At stake are two conceptions of metaphysics. Ancient metaphysics and its definition of mastery separates freedom from barbarism (or master from slave) but the separation here is the real barbarism. Its barbarism is in denying that it exploits and needs the work and resources of others for its own ends. The modern version of this barbarism is the merely abstract Western definition of mastery as individual freedom, which not only exploits natural and human resources, but does so increasingly by outsourcing this exploitation to areas of the world that remain largely invisible~~ a different notion of truth and of freedom than that which we have inherited from

Antiquity, one which does not export work and exploit others as resources for its own ends. I want to argue instead, that this newly emerging idea of green metaphysics is not framed within the logic or metaphysics of mastery, and does not have its praxis in the idea that what compromises freedom has to be *overcome*. Instead, it knows that the only true definition of the in-itself, or of mastery, is that mastery which knows itself to be unavoidably vulnerable,

unstable, and self-contradictory. To know this is to accept that the true, the in-itself, is never pure. But what marks out green metaphysics here from any number of such observations, is that it also sees that what is sustainable and renewable here is precisely this *education*, or this *learning* about mastery by mastery. This is what we might call *green educational labour*, the sustainable and renewable work of education and learning.

Now, I have stated this rather bluntly, and this is all we can do in the time available to us. You may have questions that we can raise in our discussions. What I want to do in the time that remains, however, is to make a few observations about this green educational metaphysics and liberal education specifically.

Liberal arts has its history in the tradition of the metaphysics of exploitation, or in the metaphysics of the master and slave. The liberal artist was the leisured gentleman for whom any kind of paid work was a corruption of pure intellectual enquiry and virtue. What would a liberal arts education be if it was rooted instead in green metaphysics? It would still value intellectual work, but it could not exploit the labour or resources of others in the name of pure or abstract mastery. Here liberal arts education would be set the challenge to work with notions of truth and freedom that were not exploitative. How, then, would they be sustainable and renewable if not by exploitation?

Here we can look to Socrates and Rousseau. Perhaps Socrates can be retrieved as working with green metaphysics and therefore with green metaphysical education. The relentless

questioning that characterises Socratic pedagogy sought to undermine the illusory mastery of anyone who thought that they knew things which, under closer examination, had the frailty and vulnerability of such knowledge exposed. Here the source of energy is the dialectic. Dialectic finds its own resources from within its own negative character. The sustainability and renewability of dialectic is ‘fuelled’ by *doubt*, an educational resource which it finds from within itself, by its own work, and which appears to be limitless. Doubt in the thinking and questioning mind seems to be a self-renewable organic energy source. The political implications of this green educational labour are stark. Sustainable and renewable education is not to be found in mastery and exploitation, or in overcoming threats to mastery, but in the collapse of mastery by the work of questioning, and with it the collapse of justifications for exploitation and overcoming.

But what does such green educational work look like in fossil fuel culture? Here we might learn from Rousseau. The master has a great deal to gain from continuing to exploit the labour of others. So why would the master wish to sacrifice privilege and elite status for a deeper and greener education, one in which the master has so much more to lose? One response from Rousseau would be that the things considered valuable by the master are grounded in *amour propre*, in the love that is based on a false understanding of true human needs. This love of being loved by others makes one live a life of deceit, for no one can be trusted to be truthful to themselves or others whose primary goal is to be thought to be better than others, with all the intrigue of rivalry and competition that accompanies it. Rousseau’s green educational project takes up the challenge of the individual who is motivated by the natural resources of self-preservation and compassion for the suffering and death of others

(*amour de soi*). For Rousseau, in the strength of independence that is motivated only by one's true needs, and sustained by one's own abilities, the need for the exploitation of others dissolves, leaving only a basic trading relationship of truly useful objects. Exploitation is required only for those needs that an individual cannot sustain and renew from his or her own efforts.

There is a moment in *Emile* when Rousseau represents the totality of our own modern fossil fuel culture. Meeting the Savoyard priest Rousseau intimates that the demands made upon resources to serve illusory needs have become so powerful as to be considered natural needs, and therefore to be not superfluous luxuries at all, but rather, entitlements, even necessities. These have come to define human nature and human freedom. Putting the critique in the words of the priest, Rousseau records the following comments:

He beheld the poor groaning under the tyranny of the rich, and the rich under the tyranny of their own prejudices. 'Believe me,' he said, 'our illusions far from concealing our woes, only increase them by giving value to what is in itself valueless.'  
'What gloomy ideas,' I exclaimed bitterly. 'If we must deny ourselves everything, we might as well never have been born; and if we must despise even happiness itself who can be happy?'  
'I am,' replied the (Savoyard) priest...  
(Rousseau, 2000, p. 273)

How can this priest say that he is happy in wanting less, not more? Perhaps we might suggest here that happiness can be seen to be limited, rather than added to, by the unsustainable, non-renewable and exploitative social relations of market freedoms that constitute the false totality in which we live. Even those who work at its coal-face, bewitched by the red and green numbers that flick across their screens, live under the constant pressure for growth,

performance, and profit that are necessary in order to sustain and constantly to increase their entitlements, their freedoms, and their happiness. But these masters are chasing their tails in a spiral of market-induced madness, while the slaves, right now, are drowning in the Mediterranean risking life and limb desperate for a share of this unsustainable illusion.<sup>5</sup>

~~But fossil fuel culture makes a mistake it if underestimates education as a sustainable source of self-renewing energy and work. Green education makes itself heard when we experience the contradictions in our own lives of unsustainable freedoms and privileges. This education is sustainable because it has its own truth, and it is renewable as the development of our understanding of the world we reproduce. Unlike the global market, this learning is a growth that is sustainable.~~

~~With such thinking comes the voice of green metaphysics. Here truth no longer belongs to the master requiring the exploitation of the slaves. Rather, truth sees now that exploitation and its freedoms are unsustainable. In this education learning renews itself and in doing so re-defines what truth is. No longer truth merely in-itself, no longer truth held in the illusion of immunity from being for another. Instead, now, green metaphysics offers truth in-itself only when and because the in-itself, all along, was for another; this redefines truth, for now it is truth for-itself in the vulnerability of the in-itself compromised by its being for another. Here, what is sustainable and renewable, is truth, or the in-itself, learning to *know thyself*, casting off the illusions of mastery and risking therein the sustainability and renewability of education.~~

If a different kind of happiness is possible, one that is grounded in being sustainable, renewable and non-exploitative, might it not be found in the green metaphysics of learning and education? But it would surely be counter-intuitive to suggest that this could be found in a liberal arts education. As we saw, liberal arts is the tradition of the master. It has been the safeguard of the elitism of the master. Nevertheless, working now with green metaphysics, perhaps liberal arts is better placed to carry sustainable and renewable education than any one single academic discipline. I will end with two suggestions as to why this might be the case.

First, a modern metaphysical or green metaphysical conception of education retrieves the idea of education as *comprehensive*. Liberal arts has always held itself to be comprehensive in that it is able to ask the big questions without restrictions of professionally defined subject boundaries. Liberal arts has always transgressed such boundaries in the search for comprehensive perspectives. This comprehensive ideal is grounded in the world of integration, and the earliest examples in liberal arts were the areas of metaphysics, physics and politics integrated into one understanding of the macrocosm and microcosm. At a time now when the subject disciplines enjoy such a strong hold over the shape of higher education, liberal arts can retrieve the universal and the particular in a common integrated curriculum. Climate change, for example, is not best addressed only within the local or the parochial, or in a division between science and the arts, or indeed within the restricted perspectives of single academic subjects. It requires a comprehensive education, and part of this comprehensive education is to be able to admit to the unpalatable complicity that, in the totality of climate change, we are both exploiter and exploited. Without this renewable and sustainable Socratic energy, and without the negative happiness of Rousseau's Savoyard

priest, we may have no way of responding with ecological integrity to the fact that it is the ‘socially, economically, culturally, politically, institutionally, or otherwise marginalized [who] are especially vulnerable to climate change’ (Intergovernmental Panel On Climate Change, 2014, p. 6).

All of which brings me to my second point regarding the ways in which liberal arts might be well-placed to take on the challenge of green metaphysics. Again in their 2015 *Manifesto*, the Green Party stated that

Renewables can supply all the energy we need for a comfortable standard of living, but only if we invest wisely and manage our demand more sensibly – by reducing energy waste and improving efficiency. The Green Party would seek to cut energy demand by one-third by 2020, one-half by 2030 and two-thirds by 2050. (Green Party, 2015, p. 21)

Liberal arts education, in line with the Delphic maxim ‘nothing in excess’, has often educated for the virtue of self-discipline against greed and excess. Climate change demands just such an education. If the problems of the environment can be said, in broad terms, to be those grounded in the unsustainable lifestyles that market forces are clever enough to label as the entitlements of Western societies, then some element of self-negation, self-deprivation, some decision to give up voluntarily some of the things we take for granted, may well be the prerequisite for addressing the environmental agenda. Liberal Arts has always held to an education which is able to encompass all of this into a simple phrase, also found in the temple at Delphi, *know thyself*. Know thyself is a concept of growth that can resist the unsustainable idea that growth means more and more. As Socrates showed, growth as *education* might mean knowing less, needing less, wanting less.



To conclude then, a green metaphysical education commends us to address the need for thoughtful students for whom deep thinking is still the crucible of change; for whom first principles of equality and justice are not abstracted from the need to know thyself; and for whom the rat-race, or jobs in corrupting institutions, or the entitlement to wealth and privilege, are not their life's aims. A degree, a university, a culture, that cannot cope with the challenges of searching for meaning in the relation of the macrocosm and microcosm, will only continue to educate according to an unsustainable tyranny of self-interest, offering scepticism and cynicism as an apology. Green education, sustainable because renewable without being exploitative, can make its contribution to re-thinking the common existence of humankind.

But if green metaphysical education is not included in the aspirations of targets and goals for reduced energy demand and reduced energy waste; if the individual, the community, the state, and the world are not encouraged to voluntarily undertake to know thyself in order to examine ingrained expectations of entitlement and privilege; and if know thyself here does not venture into the issue regarding the distribution of the earth's resources, namely, what are to count as 'basic needs' and a 'comfortable standard of living', then, to put it rather bluntly, we should not be surprised if fascistic emergency regulations at home, and increasing conflict for control and exploitation of resources abroad, are unleashed under the banner of 'necessary for our way of living'. Our fossil fuel culture is unlikely to yield in and of itself. If it is to be transformed, then education is the first and last strategy that can do so with (relative) justice and in (relative) peace.

## References

Green Party UK, (2015) *General Election Manifesto*,

[https://www.greenparty.org.uk/assets/files/manifesto/Green\\_Party\\_2015\\_General\\_Election\\_Manifesto\\_Searchable.pdf](https://www.greenparty.org.uk/assets/files/manifesto/Green_Party_2015_General_Election_Manifesto_Searchable.pdf)

Intergovernmental Panel On Climate Change (2014) *Climate Change, Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability*, at [http://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/assessment-report/ar5/wg2/ar5\\_wgII\\_spm\\_en.pdf](http://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/assessment-report/ar5/wg2/ar5_wgII_spm_en.pdf)

Rousseau, J.J. (2000) *Emile*, trans. B. Foxley, London, Everyman.

---

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Journal has kindly agreed to this paper being published in the form in which it given at the Conference on May 13<sup>th</sup>, 2016, at the Leuphana University of Lüneburg. Inevitably this means the paper will lack many of the substantive references that might be expected for a more traditional academic piece. I am grateful to Michael Peters especially for this, enabling the piece to retain the style and atmosphere of this student conference. Such changes that have been made are those which the reviewers helpfully drew attention to. I note too, that a second Liberal Education Student Conference was held in May 2017 at the University of Freiburg.

<sup>2</sup> You will notice I am using liberal education and liberal arts education interchangeably in my talk. On other occasions I might not be so loose.

<sup>3</sup> See N. Tubbs, (2015) *Philosophy and Modern Liberal Arts Education: Freedom is to Learn*, Basingstoke, PalgraveMacmillan.

<sup>4</sup> See N. Tubbs (2008) *Education in Hegel*, London, Continuum, Chapter 3.

<sup>5</sup> Speaking of events in May 2016 which, although less featured in the news, still continue a year later.